

# The Greek myths



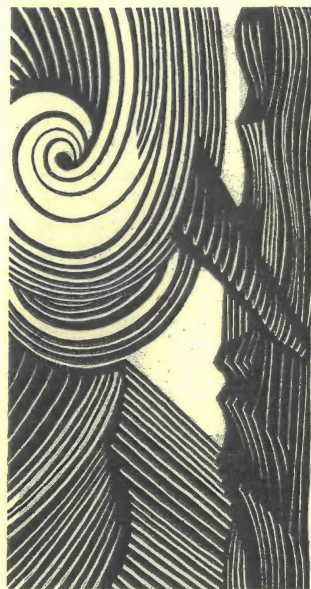
## The Odyssey

By James Davidson  
Foreword by Mary Beard

No 6 in a series of 6

**theguardian**





# The Odyssey

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# Foreword

## Mary Beard

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Assistant editor Philip Oltermann  
Art director Gavin Brammall  
Design Emma Tracey  
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Production Joanna Rodell  
Illustrations by John Spencer

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Booklets in the Greek myths series:

1. Origins of the gods
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6. The Odyssey

"Pen" is an ambitious photojournalist who has gone off to cover "the war" (it turns out to be a long one). "Od" is her house-husband partner, left behind minding "Tel", his baby daughter – who grows up never knowing her mother, and having to cope with the hordes of documentary film-makers who invade her home to get the story of mum's absence, and dad's lonely wait for her return ...

Sounds familiar? Melissa James Gibson's play *Current Nobody*, which has just ended its opening run in Washington DC, is the most recent retelling of the myth of Odysseus. It is part of a proud tradition of myth-making that goes back in a series of revisions, adaptations and parodies, in cultures high and low, to the very origins of European literature: from James Joyce's Ulysses to a boozy burlesque by Euripides on Odysseus's encounter with the Cyclops (in which the giant is taught the delights of fine wine and how to behave like a proper Greek); from the Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* to the early Christian Acts of Andrew, where Odysseus pops up again in the guise of a Christian saint.

In fact, the story of Odysseus is so much part of contemporary culture that it is one of the few Greek myths that still function, even for us, as a living myth, rather than a piece of literature. You don't need to have picked up Homer, or delved into any mythological handbooks, to be familiar with Odysseus's journey home, to know what an "odyssey" is. It's a point nicely made by *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*: the opening credits acknowledge Homer's Odyssey; the Coen Brothers claim they haven't actually read it.

So what is the secret of this longevity? Fans of Homer never tire of pointing out that the story of Odysseus's return is the original, archetypal narrative that underlies all others: "man leaves home and comes back again, overcoming numerous difficulties". Or, as David Bader recently summarised the *Odyssey* (in haiku form):

*Aegean forecast –  
storms, chance of one-eyed giants  
delays expected*



Every story, in other words, is Odysseus's wandering rewritten. It is a gloomy reflection, perhaps, on the unoriginality of the western literary tradition that it can't escape the constraints of the first story it ever told (or, strictly speaking, giving precedence to the *Iliad*, the second). And it is not the whole explanation of Odysseus's appeal. No less important are the cultural and moral questions that the story poses: whose side are we on, whose values do we respect, what view of "humanity" does the myth promote? Odysseus is smart and wily, a man who exploits human intelligence rather than mere muscle power. But in much of Greek literature after Homer, Odysseus is not just clever, but a downright liar. You'd want him on your side, but wouldn't trust him an inch. In any case, even in Homer, he ends up with a good deal of blood on his hands. By the time Odysseus gets back to Penelope, all his companions are dead, and his re-entry to Ithaca is marked by mass slaughter – not only of the suitors, who maybe deserved it, but also of a group of maidservants whose only crime, in a household under duress, was sex with the suitors.

The moral ambivalence is brought out most strongly in Odysseus's contest with the Cyclops. True, the giant is an uncivilised and murderous cannibal. But he is also a simple soul, who is cruelly outwitted by "cunning Odysseus" (as the Greeks so often called him) and horribly mutilated. Is civilisation here any better than barbarity? Does Odysseus offer an appropriate model for mankind? In short, the myth of Odysseus asks the most important question there is: how should a man behave?

But is it just "a man"? For decades feminist scholars have been ransacking versions of the Odysseus story in search of a positive message for women – between the sorceresses and the stay-at-homes – with little success. It is the feminist poets, novelists and playwrights who have done most to reclaim this myth for the other half of the human race. Dorothy Parker had sharp words about the laddish adventures of Odysseus, in comparison with the tedious domesticity imposed on Penelope in Ithaca ("He shall ride the silver seas ... I shall sit at home, and rock"). Margaret Atwood in her *Penelopiad* told the story from the other side: reinventing the viewpoint of the long-suffering Penelope, abandoned for 20 years and then confronted with the return of her husband, that well-known liar.

Now Gibson has gone one step further: she has let Penelope go off on her travels, and forced Odysseus to stay at home, weave and look after the baby. A mythical revenge on the misogyny of the myth?

*Mary Beard is a professor of classics at Cambridge University*

## First encounters



### *After the sack of Troy*

When, in the small hours of that fateful day, the Greek champions were released from the wooden horse, it seemed as if something terrible was also released from inside every one of them: all the vengefulness on behalf of fallen comrades, all the bitterness of being away from their families, but, above all, the sheer hatred, fermented over 10 long years to produce a heady sense of vindication. Night had spawned a whole new batch of bastard offspring.

Priam, a grandfather, was cut down in front of his daughters. His terrified grandson, Astyanax, son of Hector, was flung from the city walls. Andromache, noble Hector's wife, was spat upon by all who passed her as she sat quietly amid the booty of Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, not yet out of his teens. Grandmother Hecuba, Priam's queen, was on all fours with a collar round her neck, dragged around like a dog on a leash.

Gaia, the goddess of Earth, was extremely gratified. The most ancient goddess had seen it all before and was relieved that the burden of humanity was getting lighter by the hour. But the other gods looked on with horror and disbelief.



"Is this not the day you two have been working towards," asked Zeus of Hera, his wife, and Athena, his daughter, "ever since Trojan Paris slighted you somewhat by offering the apple to Aphrodite? So why do you now avert your eyes, Athena? Do your beloved Greeks surprise you? You were ready to make Asia the conqueror of Greece, even to offer to Paris the honour of sacking your beloved Athens. So look now at what a city sacking looks like, and in particular look at this scene currently unfolding in your own temple on Troy's lofty citadel. The princess Cassandra is clinging to your statue, reminding you of all the gifts the Trojans have given you over the years, begging for your assistance. Or are your ears deaf to prayers when they are spoken in a Trojan accent?"

Athena could see only too well, for she could look through the eyes of her statue and felt Cassandra's arms around her knees. It was as if she was standing there in the lamp-lit temple, as if the scene were unfolding right in front of her. Cassandra's royal robes were already ripped and cut, exposing her naked body. One of the Greeks, Ajax, approached her with drawn sword. Cassandra held out her hand in supplication. Ajax grabbed her and raped her inside the temple. While this happened Cassandra never took her eyes off the statue of Athena, and what she saw was its brazen neck bend back and its eyes roll upwards, until the statue was staring at the ceiling.

Of all the atrocities committed by the Greeks in their sacking of Troy, this was the most unwise. For the rape of Cassandra greatly embarrassed Athena, who had done so much to bring the sacking about. The gods thought it right that the goddess who had done most to bring the Greeks victory should be the one who most severely punished them, while Athena thought she could not be seen to be soft on impiety. So, as the fleet sailed home in ships stocked up with precious Trojan items, and a fair wind in their sails, they were quite oblivious to the fact that the gods were offended. But when they were at sea, far from any safe landing, a great darkness spread over the Aegean. Night fell, and in the dark the wind grew suddenly wilder, first driving the ships against each other, then scattering them on to lonely rocks and hidden reefs and the shores of distant islands.

The storm abated as quickly as it had arisen and dawn rose upon what looked like a watery battlefield. The sea was scattered with broken ships and floating corpses. But Ajax, as it happened, survived the god-

sent storm, though it was his impious atrocity that had done most to provoke it. Dawn saw him clinging to a rock at the base of a cliff on the island of Mykonos, panting for breath but with life in him yet. "What a beautiful day it has turned out to be," he shouted at the blue heavens, "for I, if you have not noticed, have survived." Immediately the rock broke off from the island and buried him in its wake.

Not all the Greeks were killed that night, but it would be many years before some of them got home – and of those who got home soonest, some would wish they hadn't.

### *The land of the Lotus Eaters*

None of the heroes who departed from Troy would take as long to get home as Odysseus. It was not the anger of Athena that slowed him, for Odysseus had a subtle mind and Athena therefore loved him. Rather, it was his curiosity that was to blame for his long and convoluted journey. However much he wanted to reach Ithaca, his son Telemachus and wife Penelope, he could not resist the temptation, wherever he landed, to explore and see if he could get something out of the local inhabitants to take away with him. It was not long before this tendency got him into trouble and made him the bitter enemy of another god, a god no one would wish to have against them when a long voyage lay ahead: Poseidon, god of the sea.

So Odysseus survived Athena's storm intact and his fleet of 12 ships sailed on. As if they had not yet had their fill of war, they sacked the first city they came to: Ismarus in Thrace. There they found Maron, a son of Dionysus and Ariadne. In return for his life, Maron gave Odysseus much of his secret store of honey-sweet wine, just a whiff of which drives men to distraction. Having stored away their loot, the fleet sailed on. But as they rounded the coast of the Peloponnese, just days away from Ithaca, Boreas, the north wind, blew them in the wrong direction all the way to the shores of African Libya. There was no particular reason for this: winds will do what they will, and only one man has been given the authority to control them.

Washed up in Africa, Odysseus sent out three of his men to see what manner of people lived there, for he had heard legends of the rich kingdom from which Andromeda came, the one ruled by Cepheus and vain Cassiope. The three did not return. Odysseus went to see for himself what had happened to them, wondering if perhaps they had been captured or killed. He soon found them sitting cross-legged



on the ground at a picnic, garlanded with flowers and eating and drinking with the local inhabitants. Odysseus ordered them back to the ships, but the three did not even look up from the banquet to see where the voice was coming from. Odysseus squatted down in front of them: "This is your king speaking. Get back to the fleet at once." His men merely smiled as if they did not recognise him. Their dining companions, who wore identical smiles, took only a little more notice of him: "Eat," said one, proffering what looked like the flower of a water lily. "Drink," said another, pushing a fragrant cup at Odysseus. "Stay," said the third as she placed a garland of flowers around Odysseus's neck.

Odysseus flew into a rage. He knocked the food from his men's delinquent hands, dashed their cups to the ground and ordered them to be carted back to the ship immediately, to face disciplinary action. But as the three men were carried off, their dreamy smiles became savage maws, as they bit their captors and clawed their way back to the picnic, whereupon the Lotus Eaters, for this is how Odysseus named the tribe, put food in their hands and poured liquid in their cups, and immediately their dreamy smiles returned. So Odysseus ordered his men to treat them more gently. They carried them off one by one, still cross-legged, still eating the flower-food, still smiling, all the way back to the ships. On the beach, he ordered the three to be tied and bound as they were, and placed below the benches. The fleet set sail at once, before another member of the crew discovered the lotus. For many days the three men raved and ranted and wept, begging to be returned to the land of the Lotus Eaters, but they did not escape from their bonds and after a while they recovered their senses.

### **Polyphemus**

Odysseus looked constantly for a land where his men could recover their strength after all their trials and tribulations. They had spent many days at sea, since the storm that blew them off course, with only the briefest stop in the seductively dangerous land of the Lotus Eaters. Finally the gods drove him to an uninhabited island with a natural harbour and an abundance of goats and grassy meadows. Here they feasted to their hearts' content. But the neighbouring island was not uninhabited. Odysseus saw smoke rising and could not resist investigating.

This island was home to the Cyclopes. These were the second and

lowlier race of one-eyed giants to be born on the planet; they were sons not of Gaia but of Poseidon. They spoke Greek but that was the limit of their accomplishments. They had no communities but kept themselves to themselves and lived as in the days of Cronus, without laws or houses or agriculture.

Odysseus took a ship across to this island, hoping to establish contact with these people and to acquire some souvenirs to take away with him. The party did not travel far from the ship before they found a mountain cave, filled with flocks of sheep and goats and all the products of a pastoral lifestyle: pails of milk and curds and whey and a great abundance of cheeses. His men were all for taking what they could and getting out of there, but Odysseus had more regard for niceties and wished still to make contact with the occupant. He soon arrived, a mountain of a man with a single round eye in the middle of his forehead. He milked the sheep and goats and rolled an enormous boulder across the cave's entrance to seal it for the night. Then he saw the visitors. "Are you traders or raiders?" he asked in a voice that boomed deafeningly around the cave. "We are a remnant of the army of Agamemnon that famously sacked great Troy. By the will of Zeus we were blown off course and shipwrecked on this island and wish to impose ourselves upon your hospitality, for they say that guests are under the gods' protection, and Zeus rewards those who are kind to strangers and punishes those who mistreat them."

In response the giant grabbed two of Odysseus's men and put them in his mighty mouth and started chewing on them. "Is this what you mean by 'mistreating'?" said the monster, talking with his mouth full. "You are either ignorant or stupid, little Greek. Here we do not worship Zeus and have no regard for either hospitality or religion. For we are stronger than the gods and do not fear them." He finished his horrible supper of raw human flesh, washed down with a bucket of milk. Then he went to sleep most contentedly.

Next morning the giant ate two more of Odysseus's men for breakfast and then drove out his flocks to pasture, making sure his little herd of humans was safely locked inside, only kind enough to leave the fire alight so they might not freeze to death and might have a little illumination. In the light of the fire, Odysseus noticed a walking stick in the corner of the cave, a giant's walking stick, that is, as large as a ship's mast. He ordered his men to forge it into a



weapon, by sharpening one end into a point and hardening it in the fire. Then they buried it in a pile of sheep's dung, of which there was no small quantity. "If we drive this through his heart, while he sleeps, we will be stuck here forever," said his men. "For we will never manage to move that mighty boulder ourselves, the one that seals the entrance." "Kill him? That is no way to treat our host," said Odysseus, seemingly appalled, "not before he has been allowed to pay us the courtesy of seeing us off the premises, at least, and wishing us a pleasant onward journey."

That evening the giant returned and ate another brace of men for supper as was becoming his custom. "If this is how you treat your guests, no one will come and visit you ever again," said Odysseus, "nor will you receive presents, such as this skin of Maronean wine I brought for you and would have given you had you not been so discourteous."

"Forgive me," said the Cyclops, "I am indeed forgetting my manners." He held out his enormous hand. "I am Polyphemus, Poseidon's son. To whom do I owe the honour?" "To Noah Natawl," said Odysseus, holding out his hand in turn, which the giant shook most refinedly. "Now give," said the giant, "and I will give you something in return." So Odysseus offered him some of his Maronean wine. "An excellent nose, a good colour," said the giant, lapping it up from a bucket like a cat and then downing an entire skinful, after which he belched, emitting such fumes from his stomach that Odysseus almost started retching. The Cyclops continued: "In return, kind sir, I will do you the honour of dining off you last." "You are too kind," said Odysseus. "No, really, I insist," said the Cyclops, between belches. "Please" – belch – "think nothing" – belch – "of it."

Already his speech was slurred and as Maron's potent liquor took effect, Polyphemus keeled over on his side in a pool of his own vomit. The Ithacans could see arms and legs and other half-digested gobbets of fallen comrades swimming in the stinking vapours. When they heard his drunken snores, Odysseus and his men took the sharpened stake and heated it once more in the fire until it glowed red and orange. Then they ran at the giant, full-tilt, plunging the red-hot stake in his eye. The eyeball hissed and the blood boiled around it. They turned the stake in the eye-socket round and round, like stonemasons boring a hole in a stone. The giant bellowed deafeningly and pulled out the offending beam. But he pulled

out his eyeball with it and sat there bawling like a one-eyed child holding a gruesome lollipop.

At once the other Cyclopes came running from all over the island and knocked on the boulder of his cave. "What is going on in there? Who attacks you?" "I am attacked by Noah Natawl," said Polyphemus. "If no one at all is attacking you," said the other Cyclopes, "then it must be some god-sent affliction. You must be ill. Have a lie down. You will be all right in the morning." Then they left, for the Cyclopes did not cultivate neighbourliness, which they considered a vice not a virtue. All night long the Cyclops raved and ranted and threatened, without much imagination. "I will peel you like a prawn, Noah Natawl, pop your head between my fingers and suck out all your juices." Odysseus's companions feared their king would make some riposte, and Odysseus would have done so, had they not pleaded with him silently, with fingers to their lips, until they prevailed upon him to keep his mouth shut until morning.

Next morning the Cyclops rolled away the boulder that formed the entrance to his cave so his sheep could besent out to their accustomed pastures. He put his 10 fingers over the entrance, sending the sheep out to pasture but feeling their backs to make sure they carried no riders. But the sheep were fat and fleecy, and Odysseus tied his men underneath them, then clung to the underside of the fattest and fleeciast and exited unnoticed.

So the Ithacans escaped and ran quietly to the ship, loaded the sheep on board and rowed away. When they had reached some distance, Odysseus hollered to Polyphemus, despite the best efforts of his men to stop him. "Once you were one-eyed, now you are no-eyed, Polyphemus. But please do me this one last courtesy: if anyone asks you who was the great hero who, though small, did you such great damage, tell them it was not Noah Natawl, but Odysseus king of Ithaca." And Polyphemus raised his arms up to heaven and prayed to his father Poseidon, that he might do all in his power to prevent Odysseus coming home, or at least to make his journey a most unpleasant one. And Poseidon heard him, for Polyphemus, after all, was his own dear son.



## Circe's isle



When they heard Polyphemus's prayer, the Ithacans groaned and not for the last time wished their king was a little more keen to get them home and a little less curious and fond of glory. But all was forgiven when they bumped into Aeolia, the floating island of Aeolus whom Zeus had made master of winds.

For a month Aeolus entertained them, while Odysseus regaled him with tales of the Trojan war. Therefore Aeolus took a hide and bound into it all winds except the western wind, Zephyrus, tying the hide with a silver thread like a bag. So for nine days Zephyrus had the atmosphere to himself and blew the fleet eastwards across the length of the Mediterranean until Ithaca loomed into view. But the men were suspicious that Odysseus, who had always been careful to distribute spoils, seemed to be keeping Aeolus's gifts to himself, so they cut the silver thread to see what was inside. Out rushed the winds and blew them all the way back to Aeolia. Aeolus feared to help them again, for it seemed the gods were against the Ithacans.

The fleet was on its own, miles from home, and next dropped anchor in the harbour of the Laestrygonians. This was perhaps the biggest mistake Odysseus ever made. For this race was even worse than the Cyclopes. They were just as gigantic, but two-eyed and organised. The Laestrygonians speared the Ithacans like fish as they

were tied up in the harbour. Only Odysseus's ship escaped. All the rest were killed.

The sad and solitary vessel next made land on Aeaea. Here they gladly beached the ship and rested two days and two nights, recovering physically, recuperating spiritually, from their wounds and their traumas. But they had no resources, nor any sense of where they were, and so when Odysseus saw smoke rising from the middle of a thick forest, he sent off half the crew, well armed, but most reluctant, to reconnoitre. Only one member of the party returned and he could not say what had happened to his companions. The men seemed to have vanished into thin air. As they approached the house in the thickness of the forest, where the smoke was coming from, they had heard a woman singing. The others went in, unafraid of a woman. He had stayed back, for there was something about her song that sounded inhuman.

Odysseus went on his own to investigate, but was stopped as he approached the house by a handsome youth who took his hand. Odysseus was delighted, for it was charming Hermes. "Bold and reckless, lone Odysseus, do you not know that the men you seek are men no longer, but have been turned into beasts? For this is Aeaea, Circe's isle, and this her famous homestead. She is the divine daughter of sun god Helios, sister of Aetes, king of Colchis and of Pasiphaë, the Minotaur's mother." Hermes reached to the ground and pulled out a plant with a pure white flower but black at the root. "You will need this. This is moly. Keep it about your person and you will be immune from Circe's charms which are many and various. She is not so bad, however, once you get to know her." Hermes winked and rocketed off. Odysseus approached the house. He heard the eerie song and then he saw the singer.

She sat with her back to him in front of a loom. Prowling about the place were wolves and lions and cheetahs and panthers. They came towards the intruder. He took a step back, but the savage beasts nuzzled him like tame little pets. "Odysseus," said Circe, not looking round. "I hope you will stay for dinner." "Thank you, Circe," he said. That caught her attention. She turned: "I did not know I was known in Ithaca." "Goddess, your beauty is famous all the world over," said Odysseus. "Is it really?" she said. "Let's eat!" She gestured to the table, which was already covered with unusually spicy dishes. "Now then," she said when dinner was done, "what manner of beast are



you, I wonder?" So saying she tapped him on the shoulder with her wand. "That is most disappointing," she said and tapped him again with more of a flourish. Nothing happened.

"In that case," said Circe, gesturing towards a bed, "intercourse is in order." Within seconds she undressed, and at the sight of her beautiful naked body Odysseus was filled with desire. He had not lain with a woman since the sacking of Ismarus and immediately began disrobing. Just in time he remembered the moly hidden in the folds of the garments he was on the point of dropping. He drew his sword. "First swear to me, goddess, that you will not harm me." "Oh please," said Circe. "Is that really necessary? Of course I won't harm you." "Swear!" said Odysseus. "I swear!" she said. "Now please can we get down to business?" "Not yet," said Odysseus, looking at the lions and the wolves. "There is one other thing. Could we please have some privacy?" "Grrrr!" said Circe, and all the savage beasts scampered off, whimpering, leaving the lovers to the business of love.

"Now what you have done, you will undo," said Odysseus afterwards, "and turn these wolves and panthers back into my men." "Oh, these are not your men," said Circe. She led him outside to the pigsty. "These are your men. Here piggy, piggy, piggy!" The pigs formed a queue and Circe rubbed a little ointment on each of them in turn. And gradually they reverted to human form. They embraced Odysseus and wept and made him swear a promise not to tell anyone what manner of beast they had turned into.

## The voyage home



Circe herself was quite transformed and became a perfect hostess, entertaining them for a whole year. Only then did Odysseus's thoughts turn home again, but first he had to make an excursion to Hades to consult the dead seer Tiresias about his homecoming. His men begged him not to and wept and wailed, but all their weeping and wailing was of no avail. To get there they had no need of a guide, for Circe used her power to help them. They simply hoisted the sail, boated their oars and sat there; the wind did the rest. For one whole day they sailed to Ocean, the water that encircles the Earth, and as the sun set they made a journey across to its further shore. On the banks of Ocean they found a dark pool, where three underworld rivers met, and dug a trench and made offerings to Hades and Persephone and filled the trench with sheep's blood, which, when drunk, would allow the dead temporarily to recover their senses somewhat, to remember and to speak.

First Persephone sent up Odysseus's mother, Anticlea, and she came to drink from the trench, but Odysseus drew his sword and kept her away, for Circe had warned him that Tiresias must drink first, if he was going to get anything out of him. Then Tiresias appeared and drank and told him of his future: "Your troubles are not over.



You have a god against you whose dear son you blinded. You will have another god against you if you do not keep your hands off the cattle of Helios the sun god. If you touch them, your homecoming will be delayed much longer than it has been already. You will come home alone and find your house full of scavenging suitors eating up your property while they compete for your wife Penelope's hand." Odysseus could not believe his troubles would continue and resolved to keep his hands off Helios's cattle.

Tiresias now returned to the depths and other ghosts came to drink. Odysseus spoke with Anticlea and the ghosts of his fallen comrades of the Trojan war, and others he did not know were dead, including Agamemnon: "Great king, what are you doing here?" asked Odysseus. "My wife, bitter Clytaemnestra, sent me," said Agamemnon. "She blamed me still for killing Iphigeneia, and formed an adulterous alliance with Aegisthus while I was away in Troy. Clytaemnestra killed me most treacherously when I was in the bath, putting her lover on my throne. I have been looking for Iphigeneia ever since I came here, wishing to see her again and beg her forgiveness. But she is not among the dead."

Odysseus was anxious to leave that terrible place, but before he left, Persephone opened up a window on the deepest parts of the underworld and Odysseus could see all those who suffered endless torments for impious crimes. Here Tantalus stood in a pool of water which drained away whenever he stooped to drink while over his head grew wonderful fruits which moved out of reach whenever he tried to take one; he had served his own son Pelops to the gods when once they had come round for dinner. Here Sisyphus rolled his great boulder up a mountainside, sweating and straining all his muscles, but when he reached the top, the rock rolled back, and he had to begin his task all over again; he had cheated death once and escaped from Hades' halls, but Hades had retrieved him and made sure he would have something to keep him occupied for eternity.

Odysseus returned to his ship and Circe's isle and Circe gave him instructions for his voyage home. First he had to pass the Sirens, bird-women whose beautiful voices drew men to their destruction. Odysseus had himself tied to the mast, while all his men had their ears plugged. When he heard the song, he longed to join the Sirens on their meadow, which was strewn with the smiling, rotting corpses of sailors who had listened and been unable to tear themselves

away. Odysseus begged his men to release him, but they neither heard nor heeded him, and only tied him tighter when they saw him struggling against his bindings.

Next they had to pass through the narrow straits between the rock of six-necked Scylla and the rock of Charybdis, who sat on the seabed and sucked down great whirlpools of water and then spouted it out again, three times daily. "Lose some men to Scylla," Circe had advised, "or lose all your men to Charybdis." Odysseus took her advice but told his men only the half of it, for Scylla kept herself hidden. Unknowingly they rowed close to Scylla's cave, watching Charybdis's whirlpool, and as they watched the whirlpool, Scylla pounced. Six necks snaked out from her hidden lair and six men went missing from the rowing benches. She ate them at her leisure, feasting on them at the mouth of her cave. They called out to Odysseus to help them, but he ordered his men to row faster.

So they passed through the straits, exhausted and mournful, missing their comrades. But the setting sun shone its slanting beams upon a lovely island of grassy meadows filled with the most magnificent herds of cattle. It was as if the sun was caressing them. "Keep going. Do not stop," said Odysseus, for he knew this must be the island of the sun and Tiresias the seer had warned him off it, as had Circe his ex-mistress. "We need a break. We need to sleep," said a spokesman for his men. "We will not venture from the ship. We have the food that Circe gave us. Tomorrow we will sail again at first light, rested, refreshed and strengthened." And Odysseus yielded.

That night the wind changed direction and strong gusts blew from a south-easterly direction. For one whole month the same winds blew. They could not leave the island. The food ran out so they hunted birds and fished and scavenged the forest floor for acorns. But the birds ran out and the fish ran out, as did the crop of acorns. Odysseus went up to the highest point of the island and prayed to the gods to deliver them, but while he was gone his men held a council. "Would that we were pigs again in Circe's sty, for then acorns were more digestible. Instead we starve, surrounded by food, like Tantalus, but with one difference: Tantalus has no option. We will vow to build the sun god the biggest temple ever to rise on Ithaca. We will not be stealing his cattle if we sacrifice them to him first and give him his due portion. It is worth the risk, at any rate,



for we are dead men otherwise, and of all deaths there is none more painful or ignominious than death by slow starvation."

As Odysseus returned to the ship, he was met by portentous aromas. He rebuked his men when he discovered what they had done, but now there was no undoing it. They feasted and nothing happened; indeed, seven days later the contrary winds ceased and they were able, finally, to leave the island. Only when they were far out at sea did Zeus show his fury, for Helios had threatened to shine in Hades if he allowed the crime to go unpunished. So Zeus smashed the boat to smithereens with thunderbolts and lightning, leaving only one survivor clinging to the wreckage. Odysseus thanked the gods for sparing him. But the storm had blown him all the way back to Charybdis, the tug of whose current he could feel already. At the last minute he grabbed the branch of a fig tree that grew from her rock and while he hung on to it he watched the sea disappear beneath him and his flotsam vessel with it. He hung there for hours until finally Charybdis regurgitated the wreckage again and gave him back something to hold on to.

He found himself washed up on a beach. A beautiful woman was standing in front of him. "Your luck has turned at last, mortal mariner," she said. "You have reached the secret island of the goddess Calypso. Your odyssey is over."

## Penelope's suitors



It was 20 years since Odysseus had left his palace, but still his wife Penelope had some hope he would return, though most believed him dead. Many suitors had come to woo "the widow". She put them off with a ruse, persuading them to wait until she had finished a funeral shroud for Laertes, Odysseus's father, which she wove by day and secretly unravelled by night. In this way she managed to deceive them for three years. While they waited, the suitors made themselves the king's uninvited guests, eating him out of house and home. But then Penelope's ruse was discovered and the suitors demanded a decision. She came up with another ruse, an archery contest. She would marry whoever could string Odysseus's bow and fire it through 12 axes. The bow once belonged to the archer Eurytus, grandson of Apollo, and no one, she hoped, could wield it.

One by one the suitors tried their hand, but none could even string the bow let alone shoot an arrow with it through the axes. Then one of the beggars who was accustomed to feeding off the scraps the suitors left asked if he could try his hand. The suitors laughed, but were amazed to see him string the bow with ease and fire it all the way through the 12 axes. The beggar then turned his weapon on the suitors and shot them one by one. Penelope looked at the carnage. "Does this mean I must marry a beggar now?" she asked. "I am no beggar," he said, "but Odysseus, your husband."



Penelope did not recognise him, for he had left her soon after their marriage 20 years before. "Odysseus, my husband," she said, embracing him. "Please forgive me for not recognising you, for it has been 20 years since I last saw you and you are much changed. It is a balmy night, so let us take our marital bed, the one you built with your own hands, and put it under the stars." "That is a wonderful idea," said Odysseus, "but the bed I built can never be moved for it is built around the trunk of a deep-rooted olive tree." Now at last Penelope knew he really was Odysseus: the secret of the bed's immovability was known to only two people.

"Odysseus, my husband," she said, embracing him, but this time with more feeling. "Tell me how it came about that you were a beggar in your own banqueting hall." "For seven years," said Odysseus, "I was a guest of Calypso. She is a powerful goddess and was lonely so she took me to her bed. She is also a beautiful goddess, but even when I lay with her I could not stop thinking of you. She offered to make me immortal, but I preferred to get old with my Penelope than to live with the goddess forever. And then one day she let me leave, for the gods had so ordered her, and she helped me build a makeshift raft and gave me provisions for my journey."

"Poseidon sent a storm to wreck my raft, but I was saved from drowning by the white goddess Leucothea. With her help I woke up on the shores of the land of the Phaeacians. They were very entertained by all my tales of giants, witches and monsters. So they offered to take me home and gave me great riches besides. But the goddess Athena advised me of the situation here and warned me to keep my return a secret. I agreed, much though it pained me, a king begging in my own palace, seeing how the suitors treated you, longing to reveal myself to you when I saw you had begun to despair."

"But how did you come to be shipwrecked on the secret isle of Calypso? Why did you not return from Troy directly after that fateful day when the city was sacked by the men who had hidden in the famous horse?" asked Penelope. "Well," said Odysseus, and he began to tell the tale of his sorry saga. "When, in the small hours of that fateful day, the Greek champions were released from the wooden horse, it seemed as if something terrible was also released from inside every one of us: all the vengefulness on behalf of fallen comrades, all the bitterness of being away from our families, but, above all, the sheer hatred ..."